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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study described a successful educational environment for students from low-income families and examined what it is about those environments that makes them successful. The subject class was a combined fourth and fifth grade class at Taft Elementary School in a predominantly African American working class community two miles from the downtown of a western city. The teacher, a white, middle-class woman, structured her class around the daily practice of writing and said that she used a "whole language" approach. Reading and writing instruction were videotaped for 8 continuous days at the beginning of the school year, and for 5 days in February, and 2 days in May. Students were interviewed in February and May. Results indicated the existence of a highly coherent and inclusive social system--a social system characterized by clearly defined and valued practices in which all students are invited and expected to participate, and an overriding consistency of messages communicated through participation in routines and through language. There were overarching values implicit in everything that took place, so that all activity was purposeful. (Contains 18 references.) (RS)

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ED 414 584

Successful Urban Classrooms as Communities of Practice: Writing and Identity

Alan Davis

My colleagues and I attempt to describe successful educational environments for students from low income families (most of whom in our setting identify themselves as ethnic minorities), and to understand what it is about those environments that makes them successful. In particular, we have examined fourth and fifth grade classrooms in low income, urban communities, in which a majority of the students have demonstrated unusual improvement in several measures of reading and writing, agree that their teacher is the best teacher or among the best teachers they have ever had, and claim that they enjoy reading and writing and would choose to do more of it. Such a program of research calls for a theory of learning to make explicit our assumptions about how students learn, and an explanation of the persistent relationship between the accomplishments of school and the larger social structures of ethnicity and socio-economic status.

Our everyday language implies that learning is an individual accomplishment, a change in the way an individual thinks or acts: "The baby learned to walk;" "She is learning French." What our everyday language obscures is the realization that individuals exist only in relationship to perceived environments. The relationship is reciprocal: fundamental sensory perception of the environment is structured by the organism's purposes in survival (Gibson, 1979), and the mind is altered physically by recurrent patterns of experience. The human environment is profoundly social, not only in the sense that we interact regularly with other human beings, but in the sense that the activities in which we engage can only be understood in respect to social meanings. Piaget, who focused on the development of the individual, acknowledged that the individual and society cannot be separated: "What is primary is not ... the individual, nor the collection of

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individuals, but the relation between individuals, a relation that endlessly modifies the individual consciousnesses themselves" (1928/1977 p. 146).

The world as experienced by each of us is a social world of meaning, constituted of social practices unfolding historically over time (Dewey, 1916; Mead, 1934; Vygotsky, 1934; Leontiev, 1978). It is certainly true that individuals can learn apart from the company of other people. But in a larger sense, learning is inseparable from participation in larger social systems. Most learning involves changing our ways of thinking and acting that are embodied only in social and historical contexts. When we examine the individual learner, we are moving to the foreground one part of a system which does not meaningfully function as a set of individual parts, just as when we examine the brain as one part of the nervous system we recognize that it takes its form only as part of a larger system.

It is useful to examine the parts of systems, but more is to be learned by examining the relationship among the components as they interact over time. In studying the learning of 10 year old children in classrooms, we attend to the interactions among the children and their teacher, interactions whose meaning is always couched in the ongoing relations that evolve among the individuals. The students and teacher participating in this ongoing flow of interaction simultaneously perceive and interpret as they act. The flow of information is recursive; each interaction constitutes information to the group and feedback to the individual actor (Bateson, 1972).

In classrooms, interactions generally are structured by activities -- identifiable periods of interaction designated by the teacher around agreed-upon topics, with a beginning and end. Activities, in turn, are embedded in the practices of the classroom, systems of relations established through recurrent patterns of interaction across an extended period of time -- several months -- which convey the values and purposes of the class. In a voluntary association of students with adult sponsorship, such as a drama club, the core meaning of membership is participation in a well defined practice, the production of plays, and this shared understanding is central to the meaning of the activities in which members participate from day to day. In a class in a public school, membership is not voluntary at the start. What it means to be a "member" of a class of students begins with a

set of expectations, and then evolves as the teacher defines with the students the practices of the class, and what it means to participate in these. These practices stand in relationship to practices participated in by the children outside of school, and the fields of adult endeavor into which these children will become socialized over time.

Our use of "practice" acknowledges the socio-historical sense in which Lave and Wenger (1991) use the word to connote a complex set of productive activities that are engaged in by a community of persons over an extended period of time, so that the shared participation in the activities becomes the identifying characteristic both of the community and the participating individuals. Lave's examples feature systems of apprenticeship in which there is no separation of school and work, no period of formal preparation in advance of participation in the economic arena: tailors in Goa, midwives in Mexico. Learning is indistinguishable from participation in the community of practice, and so is bound up in relationship with the practice as a social role and identity, and in relationship with the community of practitioners, as the novice gradually moves from "legitimate peripheral participation" to a position of master. The person is defined by as well as defines these relations. Learning thus implies the construction of identities (Lave, 1991, p. 53).

Our use of "community of practice" is akin to Rogoff's concept of "guided participation", which she defines as "the process and system of involvement of individuals with other individuals, as they communicate and collaborate in carrying out culturally valued activity" (1993, p. 159). We have chosen to use Lave's term, however, to emphasize the extended nature of the practice as encompassing a variety of particular activities over a period of months, so that notions of membership and identity become more relevant, and to draw a parallel with *fields* of practice in the economic world (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 16).

In our view, some "appropriation" of social patterns of thinking occurs by individuals, which enables the learner to apply new ways of thinking in new situations. In Rogoff's definition, appropriation is "the process by which individuals transform their skills and understanding through their participation. Appropriation occurs in the context of engagement (often with others) in sociocultural activity, but focuses on the personal

processes of transformation that are part of an individual's participation" (1993, p. 183). Rogoff's usage draws directly on Bakhtin's (1981, p. 293) and is akin to Vygotsky's concept of "internalization". It is important to note that appropriation is not conscious, and can occur even when participation is not overt:

> What is key is participation in meaning -- not necessarily in shared action of the moment. A child who is actively observing and following the decisions made by another person is participating whether or not he or she contributes directly to decisions as they are made (Rogoff, 1991, p. 133).

We now need to draw a relationship between learning as guided participation in a social system organized around valued practices, and the critical observation that the accomplishments of children in school are systematically associated with the larger social structures of ethnicity and socio-economic status. Why is it unusual for low income African American, Latino, and white students to do well in school?

The prevailing contemporary theory to explain these associations emphasizes the cultural differences, or "incompatibility" between the home and the school -- particularly in respect to language use, but also in respect to patterns of participation and assumptions about time (Au, 19xx; Heath, 1983). Children from minority and low income families enter school with different patterns of communication and participation than those expected and reinforced by the school, which reflect the practices and competencies of the majority society and are constituted to protect and reproduce those practices.

Closely aligned with the concept of cultural incompatibility are theories of social reproduction. According to social reproduction theory, problems of schooling are not, at their most fundamental level, pedagogical. Above all, they have to do with "the ways in which the community of adults reproduces itself, with the places that newcomers can or cannot find in such communities, and with relations that can or cannot be established between these newcomers and the cultural and political life of the community" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 100). How do these larger social relations inform the life of classrooms? Social reproduction theorists have criticized schools as agents of social reproduction by pointing out how they replicate larger social structures (Habermas, 19xx; Apple, 19xx, Eckert, 19xx). For example, schools generally privilege particular forms of language and cultural norms of interaction, regulate participation through differential

treatment associated with gender and ethnicity, and in more overt ways regulate access and infer status through practices of grouping and dispensing rewards based on proficiency with culturally valued practices of reading, writing, solving problems in mathematics, and completing assignments on time. Students who arrive at school with a different set of experiences and assumptions from those valued by the culture of the classroom are placed at disadvantage from the start.

A major challenge to this line of explanation is to account for the apparent success of certain minority groups who reflect significant differences in language, religion, physical appearance, and patterns of interaction in the home in comparison with middle class white America, yet succeed in school. For example, Gibson and Bhachu (1991) have documented the academic success of the children of Sikh immigrants in California, and Matute-Bianchi (1991) has pointed out that Mexican immigrant children in California high schools have better attendance, grades, and graduation rates than children of Mexican descent born in the United States.

Ogbu and his colleagues offer a socio-historical explanation. They distinguish between voluntary and involuntary minorities, the latter consisting of groups who were subsumed into the United States through conquest or were transported here involuntarily in slavery. They argue that involuntary minorities have a different historical stance in relationship to participation in American social institutions such as schools. As agents of majority culture, schools are perceived (unconsciously as well as overtly) as places requiring conformity to foreign ways, rather than places of opportunity and access. This perception is reinforced and maintained by the observation that the benefits of school in the larger society -- access to material resources and influence, participation in the American Dream -- continue to be denied to African American and Latino adults, at least within their sphere of acquaintance.

A strength of Ogbu's explanation is that it explains how minority students from such places as India and Taiwan can succeed very well in American schools in the face of profound differences in language, religion, and racial appearance. It also explains the ironic appearance of complicity of minority students in their own failure: "... School performance is not due only to what is done to or for the minorities; it is also due to the

fact that the nature of the minorities' interpretations and responses makes them more or less accomplices to their own school success or failure" (Ogbu, 1993, p. 88). But Ogbu does not address the lack of academic success of low SES white students, who constitute the majority of "dropouts", "low achievers", and "discipline problems" in school districts where there are few minority students. To do this, we need to broaden Ogbu's insights into the interpretations and responses of involuntary minorities to their low status to include those of marginalized whites.

Bordieu's sociology of practice (Bordieu, 1977, Bordieu & Wacquant, 1992) provides such a broader framework. Bordieu rejects objectivist and phenomenological positions as alternatives for understanding social activity, and develops instead a theory that posits a necessary relationship between objective social structures (systematic inequalities in access to resources and influence) and the subjective experience of individuals. Cumulative exposure to certain social conditions instills in individuals an ensemble of durable and transposable dispositions (*habitus*) that internalize the necessities of the social environment, inscribing inside the organism the constraints of external reality.

Social structures and cognitive structures, according to Bordieu, are recursively and structurally linked, and the correspondence that obtains between them has the effect of preserving social structure. People enter into social fields of activity, each field a socially structured space in which agents act from varied social positions of participation and influence. Over the course of extended participation, they internalize the external structures of the field of participation; they develop a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which function as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions.

Structural and socio-historical explanations of the mis-match between schools as social environments and the children of low income families ultimately call for structural changes in society at large and in the design and governance of schools. But within the classrooms of existing schools, we argue that we must attend above all to drawing students in as full participants in ongoing communities of practice. Such a view requires us not to divide learning into affective and cognitive domains, or to divide teaching into domains of management and instruction. Instead, it requires us to focus on the nature of the relationship between students and teacher, the relationship among students, and the

relationship between students and subject matter in the course of activity. Rather than proscribing a particular pedagogical approach, it calls for coherent practice, so that a strong social system is created into which participation results in the appropriation of *habitus*, of dispositions and habits -- ways of thinking and being that touch on identity.

From this perspective, I want to describe one urban classroom as a site of a successful community of practice for minority students. Recently, we have studied three such classrooms for fourth and fifth graders. One of the three presents overt evidence of cultural compatibility -- a bilingual class, taught by a teacher from Equador, made up almost entirely of Mexican-American children, engaging students in cooperative rather than competitive tasks. In apparent contrast, a second class of mostly low income Mexican-American students was taught by an Anglo woman who did not speak Spanish, grouped students into high and low reading groups, provided direct instruction on phonics, and engaged them in overtly competitive activities such as spelling bees -- with very positive results. A third class, which we will explore in this paper, was made up mostly of African American students taught by a white middle class woman, who structured her class around the daily practice of writing and said that she used a "whole language" approach. The students of all three of these teachers (in two different years) improved markedly in reading and writing and endorsed their teacher as "the best" despite the fact that the ideological commitments of most of our colleagues in academia do not permit them to agree that all three could be "good teachers."

Measured Evidence of Effectiveness

Mary Kendall (a pseudonym) taught a combined fourth and fifth grade class at Taft Elementary School in a predominately African American working class community two miles from the downtown center of a western city. Manicured lawns and flower gardens of single family homes share blocks with squat rows of low-income housing and crumbling HUD houses. The neighborhood has been the site of much gang and drug-related violence in recent years, as well as the focus for innovative community activism. African American students make up 74% of the student body; 71% of the students qualify for the federal free lunch program. In these respects, Mary's class was representative of the school.

We initially selected Mary's class primarily on the basis of very high positive residual scores in a two-level hierarchical regression of six performance indicators of reading and writing on pretests at the individual and classroom level (Clarke, Davis, Rhodes, et al., 1993). In the selection year, students in Mary's class demonstrated a mean gain of 8.1 normal curve equivalent score points on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in reading (compared to a mean gain of 0.0 for a sample of 40 classrooms) and a mean gain of 3.6 NCEs on the ITBS Language Test (compared to a mean loss of -1.1 for 40 classrooms). Her class was among the five highest (out of 40) in measured improvement on scored writing samples, and scored 1.36 standard deviations above the mean in a self-report measure of Engagement in Reading. During the year that we observed her class, the mean posttest score on the ITBS Reading Test for her 13 fourth grade students was at the 75th percentile, a gain of 20.4 NCEs from their performance at the end of second grade.

Method

To study Mary Kendall's class as a social system mediated by language we observed and videotaped 15 days of instruction in her class. We videotaped reading and writing instruction for 8 continuous days at the beginning of school, and for 5 days in February and two days in May. We interviewed students in February and in May. We also followed five "focal students," two African American boys, one Mexican American boy, and two African American girls. We conducted periodic interviews with these five students. visited their homes, and interviewed the adults with whom they lived.

We drew upon Erickson's (1992) method of ethnographic microanalysis of interaction. The method aims at revealing how interaction occurs, and involves an iterative analysis of videotape, in increasingly focused stages. In the first stage, we reviewed the entire videotape record, identifying the overall structure of interaction and patterns of recurring events. We then identified a daily ritual in which the teacher read aloud to the students and led them in a large- group discussion of the reading as a key event for understanding how group identity-in-practice was established. Eleven instances of this daily event were transcribed, and the transcripts analyzed with the help a text analysis computer program, FolioViews 3.1 (Folio Corporation, 1994). Transcript

analysis involved first finding common elements of structure across all instances of the event, and then selecting two representative examples for micro-analysis. The micro-analysis attended to semantic function, tone, gesture, and movements of teacher and students in 15-minute episodes incorporating examples of each of the key elements observed across events.

Building Coherence around the Practice of Writing

It is August 25th, the first day of school. Mary Kendall stands at the doorway as students enter for the first time and find seats. She is in her mid forties, having taught for 8 years before taking a 10 year break to raise a family. Her dark brown hair and eyebrows accentuate her emerald eyes. All around her the room announces the importance of reading. A poster on the wall proclaims, "Read Widely and Wildly!" Books are everywhere -- lined up, faces out, on the black boards, stacked on top of filing cabinets, bulging out of bookshelves around the walls. Beneath the windows of the west wall run shelves filled with hundreds of books, nearly all different titles. In a few days, children's work will fill bulletin boards and hang from wires crossing the room from the ceiling.

The year begins with Mrs. Kendall learning the names of students who were not in her class last year, taking attendance, collecting permission slips and emergency cards. Then she moves to a wooden rocking chair facing a small open space midway along the east wall, sits down, and calls the children to leave their desks and to make themselves comfortable on the carpeted floor in front of her. "We're going to spend a lot of time in circle this year," she tells them, "and we will have circle meeting at different places in our room. And the time we spend at circle is very important, cause we read in circle together, we get to know each other, we talk about things that are important to us. We do a lot of sharing."

She tells the class about herself, her home, located less than a mile from the school, and her husband and children. The sort of relationship she is beginning to establish crosses the boundary of the school building. She will talk to the class often about her

family during the year, and, we will discover, she will talk to her family often about her students, and in the spring bring the entire class to her home.

> This room! This room is your home this year. I want you to feel that you want to come here. If there are things about it that you like, terrific. If there's things about it you'd like to add or change, I'm very open to suggestions. I want us to be comfortable together this year. We've added a couch that was next door and they didn't want it, and I thought it would be a nice place for us to sit and read, write, and relax. We have a lot of beanbags on the floor. We have carpet on the floor. We do a lot of things on the floor. We do our reading and writing -- you're very free today when we do our reading and writing, to take a clipboard and make yourself comfortable to write. Grab your book, find a corner and read. You do not have to stay at your desks to write. Usually we do spelling and math in our desks and much of the rest goes on the floor.

Her language implies that all belong here. She is issuing an invitation, and establishing what it is that students are invited to join. She uses "we" more often than "I". "This *your* room; I want *us* to be comfortable," she says. At the same time, the earnestness of her tone, the deliberate pace of her words, her clarity regarding the kinds of activities that will take place, and the fact that she is "open to suggestions" imply that she is in charge, that the informality suggested by cushions on the floor does not reflect any lack of serious purpose. She drives this point home:

> Guys, my job is so important. I have a wonderful job of trying to bring new knowledge to you, to get you excited about learning, to let you learn new words and use those words in writing and to learn about our country. All those are great things but I can't teach you unless you're here. So, if you stay up late and you get tired, and you think, (in a whiny, childlike voice), "I just can't get up this morning at 7:30; I'll go in about 9:00" You're gonna miss all that time from 8:15 to 9:00. Now, you need to get yourself here on time. When I go out every morning to pick you up about 8:10 when that bell rings, I want to see every one of you. Every one of you. I don't want to see you fifteen minutes late, because fifteen minutes are precious. Hang in there!

As she speaks, she leans forward, and her eyes seek the eyes of each child. They are gathered close around her, and they lean forward in response. Seven of them, now fifth graders, were in her class last year, and these messages are familiar to them. Robin, an African American girl seated near the back of the circle, knows the importance she places on attendance; when she was having difficulty getting to school on time last year, Ms.

Kendall had her buy an alarm clock and the two of them talked about how Robin had to assume responsibility for getting to school on time, regardless of whether her mother got up before she left for school.

Mary talks about the daily schedule and the weekly schedule. She talks about rules and the need for everyone to respect everyone else. There will be no put-downs, no making fun of people. Then she says, "I want to read you something." For the fifth graders who were in this class the previous year, this announces the start of an activity that is central to what we are calling the "practice" of this class. One student gets a bean bag to sit on. Then Robin, an African American girl who is one of five students in this class who participate in the Title 1 reading program because their test scores in reading are low, says that she would like to bring a poem to share, but she is "still writing it." The comment, volunteered on the first day of class, alerts us that there is already something of a distinctive community of practice in this class because a number of students are returning from the previous year.

For the new students, Mary says, "OK. Now, for the ones who were in here last year, you already know this. If you were not in here, we read. I read to you every day. Not only do you read every day, I read to you every day." She continues:

> MF: Now the book we're going to start with today is called Knots on a Counting Rope
>
> Calvin: Are we going to read [title inaudible] ?
>
> MF: Oh, we loved that book! We read it last year. You know, the fun part about it is since I had some of you last year I was pulling new books to read this year cause I thought you wouldn't want to hear the same books again, but some of them are so wonderful, I put them back on the reading shelf again. I thought, "This isn't wrong. We talked about it last year doing read overs, and reading books again, and sometimes certain books are just so special we have to read them again." So yes, that will probably be one of them Calvin. I love that book, so I'll probably read that again.
>
> OK, this is called Knots on a Counting Rope and it's by Bill Martin Jr. and it's illustrated by Ted Grand. And I'm reading this for a reason. Not only is it a wonderful book but listen for something that says in it OK? You're ready? "Tell me the story again, grandfather..."

Here is the first instance of a pattern of activity that will become a daily routine, usually taking place once every morning and every afternoon right after lunch. It begins with students settling into comfortable positions in front of the rocking chair, and these will be regulated by calling tables up in turn, so that the opportunity to sit closest to Mary will alternate. Then she will introduce the book, praising the book and providing some reason for selecting it. She will often alert students to something special to listen for, some technique employed by the writer. She will always mention the name of the author and the illustrator, and very often she will mention other books by the author and some details that make the author special. Her familiarity with children's books and writers of children's books is vast. She has met several of the authors whose books she will read, and heard them at conferences, and at times has gotten them to write a dedication to the class in the front of a book. Whenever possible she talks about writers in terms of relationship. Her introduction to this first book is more abbreviated than future introductions will be.

Mary then reads the book, pausing to show the illustrations on every page. Her voice rises, then falls to a whisper. She speaks quickly, then slows to punctuate each individual word. Students spontaneously interrupt her with questions and comments, and she responds to these with encouragement. Today, when she finishes, there is little discussion. She will end by relating the story that has been read to the craft of writing, and to the practice of being a writer in this classroom:

> OK, I read this story for a lot of reasons, first of all it's a beautiful story and secondly, I liked it because he wants his grandfather to tell him the story over and over again. He knows the story, he knows it by heart already, but he likes to hear it again and again. And that's what we're going to do this year, we're going to read stories again and again, we're going to tell stories again and again. A lot of people that write books and stuff, they're writing stories that have been told to them that were passed along and passed along and passed along. Patricia McKenzie, her grandfather was a great story teller and she's taken many of those stories that she's been told the whole time she was growing up, younger than you and your age and her grandfather told her stories and finally she's written all these stories and she's published them and she's a wonderful writer. But those stories were told and told to her.
>
> You have many stories that have been told to you. Some of those stories you need to write. You need to get them down. They need to be told just like Grandfather

told Boy. Writing is retelling a story. It's your story being told on paper. And that is a wonderful thing, because some of the stories that have been told to you, you can pass along. Those stories should be part of your journal so you can always have those stories with you. They might be stories from when you were a little kid. My daughter, Kate, I tell her stories from when she was little and I've told her those stories hundreds of times. And she's 17 years old, and she still says, "Mom, tell me about when we did this, tell me about when we did that." Same thing as Boy and Grandfather. Always keep your stories, people. And share them in here, share them with us. Share them in your stories.

Writing starts in earnest the next morning, on the second day of class. Students have spent time picking a book and reading. Then, as it will be for every morning henceforth, it is time to write.

MF: We will write every day all year, as well as we will read every day all year. Now when you sit down to write, what are some problems that might occur?

(Ss suggest need for ideas, or you forget what you wanted to write about, or you keep reading when you should be writing.)

MF: Your ideas are wonderful. That's what makes a room, guys, your ideas. We are all going to have writing folders. If you were in here last year, you keep your old one. Everything we write we keep in our writing folder. Our notes, our scratch paper, everything. Things that aren't finished yet.

She begins to go over rules for "writing workshop." A girl interjects, "Miss Kendall, can we write a book?" She replies, "Yes, I don't tell you what to write."

James, a fifth grader, adds: "I have two ideas. You could give people a little notebook they could keep in their pocket, so if you are outside and you have an idea for a story, you can write it down. Also, you could put up a cardboard sign that says, 'Do not disturb.'"

MF: That is a great idea.

Sheniqua: Once we did a play, and I got an idea off of it. I wanted to start my story the way we started the play. [Tells opening line, but inaudible]. But then I forgot.

MF: But it's good that you remembered today.

Writing is the central practice of this class. It is the productive activity that is most valued. Reading is done every day, but Mary reminds her students daily that a book or a

poem is something that a person, a writer, has written, and as writers we should always keep an eye open to what this piece of writing offers that we can use in our own writing. She talks about herself as a writer, offering details about how she keeps her journal, how she gets ideas. When the students write, she writes, and from time to time she shares what she has written.

Starting on the afternoon of the third day, time is set aside for students who have volunteered beforehand to occupy the rocking chair and read stories they have completed or are working on. After they read, each child is taught to invite "comments or questions." Responses to these invitations to comment almost always produce compliments (e.g., "I liked the part where she said she might have a disease." "I like the part at the end when he said his stomach was in a knot") and questions (e.g., "I want to know--did you write the story out of your own experience?" "Does your stepdad have rules like that?"). During these sessions, the teacher usually waits to comment until several students had spoken, and then echoed the compliments proferred by students (Australia: "I liked the way you described the little girl." Teacher: "I need to back up her statement. You had a great deal of visual detail"). By the end of February, student comments also began to include suggestions that reflected students' appropriation of comments made by the teacher during read-aloud periods and during individual writing conferences (Calvinary: "I think there was too much Tell, and not enough Show." Teacher: "How could she do that?" Calvinary: "Spice it up a little bit. Like, she said, 'She was very rich.' She could <u>show</u> how rich she was"). The discussion usually ended with a round of applause for the writer.

<u>Reading Aloud in February</u>

A representative example of reading aloud in February reveals more of the web of relations that have developed around reading and writing after students have spent more than a hundred days in a cycle of being read to, reading silently, working on stories, plays, and poems, and reading their work aloud from the Author's Chair. It is 9:38 on a clear, crisp February morning; school has been in session for just over an hour. The class worked first on mathematics, and then finished editing a set of sentences together. The students sit in chairs, grouped together in tables. Now it is time for Circle. Ms. Kendall

signals the transition by saying, "Okay, nowww, we are on Table (pause) Two today," and she begins to walk from the chalk board, in the front of the room, to the rocking chair in the back. She reaches the chair, sits, and says, "All right, may I have Two up here on the floor, please?

> Kurt Harris immediately walks over beside Mary, with Sheniqua Johnson right behind him. (Loudly:) Two. Alec, Valencia, Audis. [Sheniqua sits cross-legged on the floor directly in front of Mary. Kurt sits on the floor just to the right of the rocking chair.]
>
> Sheniqua: (adds) Kurt.
>
> [Valencia kneels beside the rocking chair on Mary's left side, with her arms on the arm of the chair. Sheniqua, seated cross-legged on the floor directly in front of the chair, frowns at her. Robin remains at her desk, reading a book to herself aloud].

Sheniqua Johnson, her hair braided in corn rows with colored beads at the end of each braid, is one of the tallest fifth grade students in the class. She had been in Ms. Kendall's class in the fourth grade, and early in that year she had disrupted the class on more than one occasion by sitting on the floor under her desk and screaming. She had been identified by low a low score on a standardized reading test as needing special assistance with reading, and until recently she has left class every afternoon to participate in additional federally funded Title 1 reading activities. Early in the fall, she was identified as having an emotional disability, but special education services were not scheduled to begin until after Christmas. When these services began, she was no longer able to participate in the federal reading program. About that time, Sheniqua began to have difficulty getting along with other students, lashing out at them verbally. When a girl brushed her desk while walking past it, she yelled, "Are you that fat that you need that much room?" No one would work with her; when Ms. Kendall moved kids near her, they would end up in tears. For the last two weeks, Sheniqua has been on a daily reward system: if she makes it through the day without an outburst, she takes a note from Ms. Kendall to the office. If she makes it through an entire week, the assistant principal treats her to a pizza. Perhaps because of this focus on rules and behavior, Sheniqua has a stickler for following procedures exactly, as we shall see.

[Valencia, one of the smallest girls in the class, lives with her grandmother because her mother currently is not in a position to take care of her. She has sickle cell anemia, and chronic stomach discomfort.]

Sheniqua (to Valencia): Robin has to sit right there.

M: No, she [Robin] can sit right behind her [Valencia]. [Mary reaches around Valencia with her left arm, looks into Valencia's eyes, and rubs Valencia's back up and down] She's [referring to Robin] doing good today.

Valencia: Well, I'm not moving.

[Sheniqua turns her head to the left and looks down at the floor, as though disappointed. Mary bends down and leans forward, until her face is only a foot away from Sheniqua's face. She gently pinches Sheniqua on both cheeks]. I like you right there. [Then again in muffled baby talk] I need you right there! [Sheniqua grins and laughs softly, an extended giggle].

[The students from Table 2 continue to take their places on the floor near the rocking chair. Table Three is called, then Table One. Nearly all the students have now gathered on the floor in front of the rocker. Kenisha, an African American fifth grader who attended a different fourth grade class last year, walks slowly from her desk and sits to the right of the rocker, close to Mary but at the edge of the group. Kenisha participates in the Talented and Gifted program.]

Okay, there we go. [The room has grown silent. All the children are sitting on the floor within 6 feet of the rocking chair. Mary rocks back in the chair, holding her book on her lap, the cover turned towards her where no one can see it].

Yesterday, we spent a few minutes talking about ideas, and how to get them.

[As she speaks, Valencia moves forward, kneeling at the left side of the rocker, and holding the arm of the chair].

[Someone appears at the door of the classroom selling candy for a fund raiser].

M: Ohh. [Leans her head far back, in mock exasperation]. Go ahead and do it quickly. Candy. [Samantha, Veronica, and three or four other students stand and move to the door]. Hustle hustle, please, guys.

[While Mary is distracted by the Candy sellers, Valencia, on the left side of the chair, leans over the arm of the chair and moves her head close to Mary's lap. Candace caresses Valencia's hair from behind. Kenisha has moved close to her on the right. Mary gives Valencia a light hug with her left arm].

[A student makes an inaudible comment].

Kenisha [to Valencia]: I know. I saw her with that book yesterday, and she tried to hide it from me.

[Julie, kneeling behind Valencia, moves to try to see the sack containing new books behind Mary].

M: (To Julie) Ahh, are you peekin'? Get away from my stash back here. [Looking at Julie and Valencia] Don't you peek at my books! [Valencia grins broadly at Julie].

Kenisha: Really, yesterday, I seen 'em, and you go [Kenisha scrunches up her face].

M: Did you peek at my books?!

Kenisha: [Softly and confidentially to Mary]: Your flowers are really pretty.

[Valencia has crawled forward so that her head is now lying on Mary's lap. Mary cradles her in her left arm. Mary looks at the door, where the candy sellers are now leaving]. Hurry, Rod. Hurry hurry.

[Candace tickles Juliana's back. Both girls smile at one another, and Juliana scratches the small of her back with the back of her hand.]

This period of settling in at the rocking chair has taken nearly five minutes. If we were to evaluate the interactions as constituting merely a transition which should be kept as brief and efficient as possible, we would see off-task behavior. If instead we understand learning as taking place in an ongoing system of relations around shared practice, then the expressions of affirmation taking place here are important in maintaining those relations. Mary responds to Valencia's need for closeness and Sheniqua's need for acceptance, security, and strict procedures with touch as well as words. The game of "peek at the book" has evolved as a way of heightening the anticipation of books as surprises, like birthday presents. The touching of backs and hair among Candace, Juliana, and Valencia reaffirm relationship.

There is also a true transition taking place here, not merely from one activity to another, but from the more mechanical task of editing that students had just completed at their desks, to the imaginative world of books and writing. Mary wants to keep these

worlds distinct, and so there is a physical and psychological period of settling in as students leave one and move to the other.

Next an exchange between Mary and James, one of four white boys in the class, illustrates more clearly how relations between teacher and student in this class are tied to participation in practice.

> James: Who wrote that book ?
>
> MF: (to James) Chris Allsberg. [Mary laughs, leans forward, and smiles at him broadly, as though the two of them are sharing a secret]. What are you grinnin' for? I saw this last night, and I thought of you, James.
>
> James: Good! My favorite book is by him.
>
> M: Why don't you bring in your favorite book by him? I don't think we've read that, have we? We've read Polar Express. That wasn't what your favorite was.
>
> James: It's Garden.
>
> M: We don't have Garden. I don't think that we have read that.
>
> MF: All right. Here we go. Now, let's see if we can get back to our mood up here. I need eyes with me.

Mary then introduces the book she will read by praising the book and establishing a sense of relationship with the author.

> MF: In our sharing of our books, we have read some things by Chris Allsberg. Polar Express we shared around the holidays, and some of his other pieces. [Pause]. This is a real interesting book and it has great pictures [Sheniqua slows her rocking back and forth, and Joe stops jiggling his hands. Across the group, the level of motion slows, and nearly all eyes are on Mary] and [slowly, quietly, deliberately:] thoughts for ideas. And yesterday we started talking about how to get ideas, and this is a real good follow up for that. Now this is a real interesting -- - (speaks very quietly, almost whispers to the students) and bizarre story. [Mary squinches her eyes and looks from side to side as she says this.] All right?

As a community of writers, we are invited to see this book as an example of our craft, a source for ideas.

Mary begins to introduce The Mysteries of Harris Burdick by Chris Allsberg. A man, Mr. Burdick, had written 14 stories, with a picture to illustrate each one. He took

the 14 pictures, each with a title and a caption, to a publisher. ("Ms. Kendall, what does 'caption' mean? asks Joe." "A caption is like a title and one sentence from it, like a lead" she answers. "Oh." "Very good question, Joe. Thank you." [She uses the word "caption" 6 more times in the following 5 minutes]) Mr. Burdick left the pictures, and never came back. But Chris Allsberg got the pictures, and they are in this book.

This introduction, before the book is actually opened, required 120 lines of transcript to convey, and so is not reproduced here. Mary stretches the story out. She repeats phrases for emphasis. Her voice rises and then falls to a whisper. Her hands move constantly as she talks. Her eyes move from face to face. She is creating a mood, drawing us in. She shows the first picture:

> OK, there's the first one, and the title he put with it is "Archie Smith, Boy Wonder." [Suddenly quieter:] And the little statement, or the lead, says "A tiny voice asked [Almost whispering:]'Is he the one?'" [Geoff, who has been lying down, suddenly sits up for a look]. Now look at this picture. [Mary begins to show the black and white full-page illustration, leaning far over the left arm of the rocking chair.] You have to look carefully. The boy's in the bed. [She moves the book very slowly around clockwise to the right. Children move toward the book to see better. James Brancard, from the right, and Audis from the middle of the circle move much closer for a better look].
>
> MF: OK. "The tiny voice asked, Is he the one?" Who's he?
>
> Calvin: Ms. Kendall, the guy who wrote all these captions, he was a cheap skate. He walked in, he never returned. My dad sometimes does that.
>
> (Ss and Mary laugh).
>
> MF: Well, you know, Calvin, if I had something this valuable, I would return.
>
> Sheniqua: You'd walk in and say you'd keep it and not come back.
>
> [General laughter from the class]
>
> M: I might do that, Sheniqua! I might say, "Whoa, I'm out of here." All right, look at this guys. Look at this. "Is he the one?"
>
> [The illustration shows a young boy asleep in bed on a summer night. A yoyo sits on the sill of the open window, and a baseball bat rests against the window sill. Five glowing lights the size of baseballs are seen, three coming from the night sky outside the window, and two that have entered the room]

Virginia: [From the back of the group] What are the two white things?

Sheniqua: [Not hearing Virginia] Where does it say that?

MF: Over here. [Points at the page. Valencia, Juliana, Sheniqua, and Candace all move forward at once to get a better look at the picture]. "Is he the one?" "A tiny voice. [Pause]. [M Whispers:] A tiny voice. I like that. [Valencia reaches up and strokes the page with her right hand]. [Mary Punctuates each word with a motion of her raised right hand:] A tiny voice.

Valencia: "Is he the one?"

M: Who do you think he is? Who's the he?

[Juliana, Candace, and Valencia all reach out to point at the figure on the page. Valencia raises her right hand to be called on.]

Sheniqua: The boy.

MF: The boy, you think?

Sheniqua: What are those two dots, I wonder?

Kenisha: I think those are the voices.

MF: The dots. You think those are the voices?

Kenisha: That's what I think.

MF: I'd like you two boys to sit up (Geoff and Kurt were lying prone on the floor).

Sheniqua: No. It says "a tiny voice". A tiny voice. [she rocks forward for emphasis]. That means one voice. [She gestures with her index finger].

MF: Well, that means he could be saying it, maybe, to this one. [Throws out her right hand, raising her voice:] Who knows?

Look at this guys. Look at this one. Okay. It's called --- ladies (to a girl not shown in the screen)

Virginia: [Raising her hand] I wanted to ask you, what were the little white things?

MF: Well, you know, Virginia, what do you think they are?

Kurt: Nobody knows.

Kenisha: I think they're the voices.

Calvin: Ms. Kendall, we could finish writing these stories.

MF: We could. Okay, now, listen to the second picture. [Valencia has laid down. M reaches down and grasps her hand, pulling her up.]

The conversation is rapid, collegial, and informal. The questions the teacher asks are questions she is genuinely interested in answering. As many questions are posed by students as by the teacher. African American girls (e.g., Kenisha, Sheniqua) are the most frequent oral participants in discussion, but participation in this exchange and in the body of transcription are not strongly patterned along racial or gender divisions.

An interesting exchange occurs later, when a picture reminds Sheniqua of a story she has heard before:

MF: Ohh, check this out. [Smiles and laughter from several students at her use of "check it out"]. [Slowly, pausing after each word:] "Mr. Linden's Library" it's called [Student: shhhhh!], and the thing says -- look at her hand when I show you this [Mary raises her right hand in a pausing gesture] -- it says, "He had warned her about the book. Now it was too late." (she shows the illustration)

[The picture shows a girl about 10 in bed with her eyes closed, her head on a pillow. A book, with large ornate script, lies open across her outstretched arm, and out of the pages and spine of the book is growing a small vine. A reading lamp is turned on on a bedside table]

Kenisha: Ooh, I know the story about that.

Student: Ooh, we heard that story.

Student: Oh, that really good story!

Sheniqua: Oh, we heard that story, huh?

Samantha: What story?

Sheniqua: [Turning around to face Samantha:] Remember, it warned her to "get out of my house." And she went into the kitchen to get something to eat, and she found another note that said, "I warned you."

Calvin: Oh, that's in my story.

Kenisha: Oh, yeah, it is.

Sheniqua: She died! They killed her.

Kurt: That's in a book, or something.

Sheniqua [turning towards Kurt]: It's like that one story, where she found a note, and it said, "Get out of this house."

Calvin: That was my story!

M: What is on her hand, and falling off?

Juliana: There's blood on her hand.

Robin: It's a cut.

Sheniqua: [touching the picture with her finger] Those are leaves coming out of the book, Robin.

MF: Mm-hmm. But does that mean that the book's alive?

Several: Yeah.

Student: It's a magic book!

Calvin: Ms. Kendall, this is sort of like my story.

Kenisha: Remember, on Addams Family Values, how they opened the book, and all that stuff came out? Maybe something came out of the book and killed her.

Sheniqua: Ms. Kendall?

M: Could be. This is called "The Seven Chairs." I thought this was a little silly ...

Sheniqua: Ms Kendall, that other one that we read, we read this book, and it said something like that, there was this note that said, "Get out of my house." [Calvin looks at Sheniqua intently].

Kenisha: [Pointing at Calvin] It was his story.

Sheniqua: [Looking directly at Mary, and not at Calvin or Kenisha] And then she went down to the kitchen, and she said ...

'alvin: [Louder, more insistent] It was my story.

[For the first time, Sheniqua looks at Calvin].

Calvin: It was my story. "Get Out of My House, or Perish Trying!"

[Sheniqua looks confused. Her eyes turn from side to side, and then look at the floor].

MF: That was his story yesterday. [Kurt claps his hands together]. (Mary to Sheniqua): That's good though. [Mary reaches her hand towards Sheniqua]. You remembered. [Mary rests Sheniqua's chin in her hand, and raises her head]. You were listening. [Sheniqua smiles broadly]. [Kurt suddenly gets up and moves to the edge of the Circle, sits against the wall.]

Sheniqua: I thought we read it in a book.

MF: See how good, Calvin? He is an authority author over there!

Calvin: I didn't even see this book and I, I didn't even see this book, I read a book sort of similar to that.

Sheniqua to Rod: Remember that book that he read yesterday?

At this point in the year, every student has written several stories or poems and shared them from the Author's Chair. Today, several remember that they know a "book" with a theme similar to that in the picture before them, but only Kenisha and Calvin are aware at first that the story was one by Calvin that he read aloud to them the day before. The teacher points out that Calvin is an "authority author," a familiar term in this class to describe an author who writes from the authority of personal experience. The exchange infers that the distinction between student authors and professional writers is blurred.

Appropriation of Ways of Thinking about Reading and Writing

In our interviews with students during the year, and especially at the end of the year, we noted the extent to which several students took on the mantle of author. For example, here is an exchange with Joe, a African American boy who lives with his great-grandmother in a low income housing project in which we saw no evidence of written materials on our home visit.

Researcher: Do you like to read?
Joe: Yeah, but mainly I like to write.
Researcher: Mainly you like to write?
Joe: Yeah. When I read, I get ideas for my stories.
Researcher: Why do you like to write?
Joe: [Goes to the shelf and retrieves a story he wrote that has been bound. He opens to a dedication page at the back.] Look at this: "You should publish more books like this one -- Audis." See?

Several students in the class mentioned reading to get ideas for writing, and most of them were eager to show us stories they had written. When we asked them how their recent stories were different than the ones they had written at the beginning of the year, the most frequent comments involved having better ideas, better characters, and using "richer language." One student, Kenisha, spoke about becoming a writer:

Researcher: How about you Kenisha, how has Mrs. Kendall helped you be a better writer?
Kenisha: By dictation. Like she brings us up to a mini-lesson, and we come and sit in front of her and she talks about what goes on and how people can be authors of authority. So when I heard about how this author wakes up every morning at such a time, and he does nothing but write and then he goes out and he comes back and he thinks and he does nothing but write all day, I mean, it kind of popped into my head that I can be a good writer too. And that I could be committed to writing.
R: Have you started writing every day?
S: Yeah.
R: Do you do it when you get up or do you do it later in the day?
S: Well, I do it when I get home. And I like to read a lot. Mrs. Kendall tells us that, to always read a lot.

With these students, we see an appropriation of ways of thinking about reading and writing that reflect the social meanings associated with these activities as they are part of the social practice of this class. With Kenisha, we see evidence that her participation as a writer consciously affected her sense of identity. It occurred to her that she could be a "good writer," not only in the sense of one who writes well, but in the sense of one who is committed to writing as a way of being, that is, one who has become a writer. With the other students in the class, we would argue that their learning was also linked to identity, in the sense that very gradually their dispositions toward reading and writing changed.

They did not think of writers as foreign to their experience; they named their favorite authors as casually as naming their favorite basketball players. Here is an exchange with Kurt and Audis, who, along with Joe and Rod, were the most athletic boys in this class, all African American:

> Audis: There's this book called Goosebumps and first I read the one she had and then she started buying them from the store. It's four of us hooked on those books (me, Kurt, Rod and Joseph).
> Researcher: Do you know more authors now?
> Audis: R. L. Stine.
> Kurt: And Chris Allsberg, he's good, and Gary Paulsen.

When I asked Joe why he liked Goosebump books, he and Kurt conferred and began showing me their favorite pages and reading aloud from the books. It was apparent that their enjoyment was shared, and that they had agreed that the books of R. Stine were "cool," that is, socially acceptable. Their sense of who they were was compatible with being "hooked" on certain books and looking forward to sharing stories they had written.

Coherence

The teacher I have described in this paper identifies herself as a "whole language teacher", and elements of her approach are very reminiscent of classrooms that whole language proponents such as Carole Edelsky and Karen Smith (1990) describe. However, I do not intend this study as advocating a particular approach to teaching, or the use of particular techniques. My colleagues and I have studied other classrooms with results we find equally impressive in which students virtually never shared their writing with one another, for example. What we see in this classroom and in the other highly successful classrooms we have studied is a highly coherent and inclusive social system. By this, we mean first a social system characterized by clearly defined and valued practices in which all students are invited and expected to participate. Further, there is an overriding consistency of messages communicated through participation in routines and through language. The words at the heart of valued practices are repeated over and over, and become part of the standard language of the class. There are ways of acting, ways of thinking, and ways of relating that are apparent on the first day of class, and are powerfully modeled and

reinforced every day, so that the class begins to resemble a micro-culture of its own. There are over-arching values implicit in everything that takes place, so that all activity is purposeful. Students become members of such a class, in the sense that through their participation they appropriate new ways of thinking. They change in their sense of who they are.

If we accept the view that education is about encouraging all sorts of students to be successful at the sorts of activities valued by contemporary technological society -- activities such as reading and writing, solving complex problems, and meeting deadlines, then in fundamental respects culturally compatible instruction is not possible for students who come from homes and streets in which such activities simply are not practiced. On the contrary, the classroom may have to present a strong countervailing environment, with values that contrast sharply with values implicit in other spheres of students' lives. What is "culturally compatible" about the classrooms we have studied is not their underlying values or the nature of activities in which students engage, but rather the development of relationship in which each person is valued and able to participate successfully.

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